

THE IMPACT OF GROWTH ON THE PROCESSES OF ADMINISTRATION

The dramatic progress achieved on all continents in the course of the Five Year Plan has been reflected in many aspects of the life of the Bahá'í community. The training institute process has continued to enhance the capacity of an increasing number of believers to promote the processes of expansion and consolidation. The enhanced sense of ownership and enthusiasm thus generated, reflected in a marked increase in individual initiative, has been especially evident in advanced clusters where the renewed teaching fervour of the friends is directed towards intensive programmes of growth.

One of the welcome results of this new vibrancy is that there is a growing contingent of believers involved in the work of the Cause, serving in numerous capacities within the framework of the Plan. Meanwhile an expanding community of interest is challenging the Bahá'í community to re-conceptualize its boundaries and cater to the requirements of an ever-swelling body of individuals walking together the path towards Bahá'u'lláh. The progress made has been reinforced by the emergence of a new culture of growth in the community.

As these developments have continued at an accelerating pace, several national communities have taken steps to reframe their administrative arrangements, so as to align them with the new requirements. Below is a review of some of the most salient aspects of the developments which impinge on the administration of the processes of growth. This review reflects the experiences of communities in the advance guard of these processes. Whereas in some instances the changes have been relatively minor and adjustments easily made, in other cases they have necessitated a major rethinking of structures and practices.

Administering the Process of Growth at the Cluster Level

With the division of countries into small geographic areas, the cluster construct has created a new arena within which the teaching work can be organized on a manageable scale. Large-scale expansion in the past had proven difficult to sustain. Whilst this was principally owing to lack of a systematic process for raising human resources, there was also limited experience with managing the process of growth at the grass roots. In this context, the learning that has been achieved about the administration of growth at the cluster level constitutes one of the major accomplishments in the current Plan.

In its 9 January 2001 letter, the Universal House of Justice placed the locus of the cluster planning work on three entities at the cluster level: "The implementation of such a programme will require the close collaboration of the institute, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, and an Area Teaching Committee." In advanced clusters these entities are directly focused on the planning and execution of teaching plans, ensuring that the victories are immediately consolidated, learning is captured, and appropriate adjustments quickly made. Taken together, the three agencies constitute a strong infrastructure, making it possible for

many decisions related to the process of growth to be made by those most intimately involved in their execution.

As the specific responsibilities of agencies operating at the cluster level became defined by the House of Justice, in several countries detailed documents that set out the scheme of coordination involving these agencies and their ancillary arms have been developed. Often modelled on the first such paper that was developed in **India**, these have assisted in clarifying roles and removing ambiguities. These documents have also formed the basis in these countries of the training and orientation of the members of the agencies, necessarily an ongoing process which continues to be refined in light of experience.

One instance of the training required by the Area Teaching Committee occurred in an advanced cluster in **Mongolia**. There, the sharp increase in new believers and the complexity of managing the consequent rise in consolidation activities highlighted the urgent need for training of the members of the Committee as well as of members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the cluster. The training included a range of important organizational capabilities—data collection and analysis, team building, and computer skills. The collaboration of the Committee, the institute coordinators, and the Auxiliary Board members has enabled this cluster to scale remarkable heights in expansion, consolidation, and human resource development.

A critically important aspect which cannot be deferred for long is the significant investment of time required from the cluster agencies, in particular the training institute coordinator and the secretary of the Area Teaching Committee—occasionally referred to as the cluster development facilitator. Experience is showing that where the number of core activities, the various campaigns related to the teaching work, and the tasks related to the collection of statistics, among other duties, reach a certain level of complexity, part- and eventually full-time workers are required. In such instances, institute coordinators and development facilitators, functioning with increasing effectiveness, are proving indispensable to the greater mobilization of the rank and file of the believers and the continuity of teaching and consolidation efforts.

The question is not initially related to whether such staff are remunerated—in many clusters the services of volunteers in these posts are being effectively harnessed. Rather, the issue is one of recognizing that the management of the processes of growth requires intensive effort on the part of a dedicated team of individuals functioning in clearly defined spheres at the grass roots. Eventually, of course, it will not be possible for the work to be carried out on a purely voluntary basis and, in time, individuals will need to be employed. Where remuneration is required, new challenges arise related to the use of the funds, and the way in which they are to be generated within the cluster and augmented from outside as necessary. Another challenge is ensuring that a flexible approach is adopted to allow for various employment arrangements.

Another important consideration is that the sizeable enlargement of the community of interest is proving a spur to the friends and institutions to adopt approaches that minimize the demarcation between Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís. As core activities attract an increasing number of participants, the challenge is to meet their needs by making them feel at home within a Bahá'í environment. To administer this new element of the community requires intimate knowledge of their needs and application of systematic attention. It involves regularly communicating with them, engaging them in a single discourse, readily utilizing their services and learning how to guide them to an ever increasing commitment to the Cause. All this is greatly facilitated by having agencies that can function at the cluster level, for this is the arrowhead of learning about all aspects of the growth process. The cluster agencies can put

in place the necessary elements such as creating a special newsletter aimed at the community of interest, engaging these new friends in the work of the cluster, or assisting Local Spiritual Assemblies to play their own part in this regard.

Involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies

The role of the Local Spiritual Assembly is, like that of all other institutions, an evolutionary one, which will develop in relation to the processes of growth. Although observations in this area are still rather preliminary, certain broad conclusions are already discernible. Where Local Assemblies have acquired the new vision of growth and adjusted to the requirements of operating within the context of the cluster, they have greatly enhanced the teaching work. Conversely, where there has been resistance to the new realities, the process of growth has been adversely affected.

It is instructive to note the effective role that Local Spiritual Assemblies have played in many clusters. In several countries where Assemblies had a low level of functioning, a significant revival of Assemblies in advanced clusters has been observed. The believers are taking responsibility for the election of their Assembly and, once formed, the Assembly is assuming greater responsibility for the affairs of the Cause than ever before.

In other instances, particularly in the context of intensive programmes of growth, Local Assemblies with a high level of functioning are rising to the challenges created by the programme. Such Assemblies have effectively reinforced the cluster plan formulated by the cluster agencies and assumed responsibility for certain elements of the endeavour within their own area. Given that the geographic scope of the planning involved often extends to several localities, a useful practice in the initial stages of development has been for the cluster agencies to share the proposed plan with the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the area. This approach can enhance the Assemblies' ability to lend their support to the programme, and encourages them to take steps to reinforce it in their localities. An example of where this is happening in many instances is the **United States**.

As teaching efforts and core activities have multiplied, Local Assemblies have been thrilled to see the opportunities created for serving the wider population. For example, an Assembly in whose area children's classes have multiplied in various neighbourhoods is delighted to know that the community in its charge is able to administer to a greater number of the children of the locality than it was ever possible before. Yet beyond the increased capacity for outreach, the positive effect on the quality of Bahá'í community life has also been reported and is reflected in the enhanced quality of its internal processes.

These conclusions are drawn in part from a survey conducted by the International Teaching Centre in about fifty advanced clusters throughout the world. The study which assessed the impact of the process of growth on several aspects of Bahá'í community life identified that 90 per cent of the surveyed clusters had experienced improvements in the Nineteen Day Feast, with nearly two-thirds of them also recording a rise in participation levels. Insights gained from conducting devotional gatherings are increasingly reflected in the spiritual programme of the Feast. According to the survey, even the consultative processes at all levels in the community—including Assembly meetings—have improved in efficacy, becoming more purposeful, united, and focused. It has also been observed that in many instances contributions to the Bahá'í Fund have been positively impacted as levels of commitment and consciousness about its spiritual significance have increased. These successes are owed to the effect of the

institute process which, fostering a deep spiritual transformation, has proven more effective in dealing with great numbers of people than most efforts at community and Spiritual Assembly development.

The survey indicated that the most significant initial contribution of Local Assemblies to the processes of growth was providing encouragement to the believers. This was particularly effective when an expansion of vision had resulted from the participation of Assembly members in the institute process as well as the study of Five Year Plan documents. Interactions with the cluster agencies were also identified as enabling Assemblies to make effective contributions. Such interactions often occur at the cluster level in the context of particular plans of action. Another effective approach to building unity of vision and action has been the convening of conferences for Local Assembly members. This approach has been employed in **Canada** where such gatherings held at the regional or cluster level by Regional Bahá'í Councils have done much to assist Local Assemblies to realign their administrative processes and priorities.

Beyond these considerations, the leadership role of the Spiritual Assemblies—be they national or local—is of profound importance. It has been observed in many clusters that the processes of growth are greatly enhanced where this leadership role is exercised through the Assemblies' constant effort to maintain the vision of growth before the believers, allowing for the two essential movements to impact priorities, avoiding unnecessary distractions, providing the necessary resources, and reinforcing the plans and initiatives at the cluster level. Further, the dynamic force of individual example as the members of Assemblies themselves become personally involved in the cluster activities, actively supporting the efforts of the cluster agencies, is imperative.

Decentralization and Regional Bahá'í Councils

Given the far-reaching developments occurring at the level of the cluster and as more intensive programmes of growth are launched, decentralization of administrative processes becomes ever more important. Accordingly, the strengthening of Regional Bahá'í Councils, where these exist, takes on added significance. The main consideration is related to the devolution of the decision making process to the appropriate level of the Bahá'í administration. In practice, this principle applies both to the devolution of decision making by National Spiritual Assemblies to the regional level, and by the Regional Bahá'í Council to the cluster level. It is increasingly evident that where the framework of the Five Year Plan has been well understood by Regional Councils, through their stewardship of the expansion and consolidation processes in their regions, the aim of a significant advance in the process of entry by troops is becoming realized.

One approach to the question of decentralization would be to focus on the relationship of the Councils with the Counsellors, the National Assembly, national committees, and offices of the National Centre, looking at the hierarchy of the various entities involved. However, more relevant to the relation between decentralization and the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops would be a consideration of whether the administrative structures are consistent with and conducive to growth at the cluster level, particularly large-scale growth. What many countries are learning is to construct the vision of administrative processes that affect growth from the cluster upwards, asking at each stage what arrangements will best advance the process of entry by troops in this new arena of action.

What is being learned, then, is that an effective administration with regard to the teaching work is one that aims to release the power of individual initiative, providing the flow of resources and freedom of operation to the coordinating structures at the cluster level. Indeed, one national community which is undertaking a wide-ranging review of its administrative processes, **India**, began by considering the reality at the level of the cluster, and considered what processes would most effectively ensure the promotion of growth. For this purpose, administration was conceptualized as constituting the channels to facilitate a series of necessary flows—flows of guidance, direction, encouragement, human resources, literature, and information, including statistics.

The challenge of gathering accurate statistics is being addressed in many countries through the application of the Statistical Report Programme (SRP) devised by the Department of Statistics at the Bahá'í World Centre. What this programme facilitates is the gathering and analysis of key data that enable an accurate and timely picture of the development of the community to be built up. Aggregating the information at the cluster, region, and country levels, SRP provides an important tool for Bahá'í institutions in their decision making process, enabling the prioritization of resources and lines of action at each level of the administration. Although initially the programme will require the investment of some effort to train a few individuals in its use and to enter the base data, once in place it is proving a valuable aid to the process of decentralization. Countries that are already implementing the SRP package include some with a substantial size of membership, such as **Brazil, Colombia, Malaysia, and Zambia**.

Impact on Administrative Process at the National Level

The ongoing process of decentralization necessitated by the Five Year Plan carries with it profound implications for administration at the national and regional levels. As national communities review their administrative structures, it is heartening to note that in many instances they are doing so in anticipation of a community that is several fold larger in size. Such a perspective is necessitating a significant shift in resources to the regional and cluster levels, as well as inevitable concomitant changes in the size and structure of the National Office.

As stated above, in the vanguard of this administrative review is **India** where the institutions have, at the encouragement of the House of Justice, begun to reassess and modify the national administration in that country to become better equipped for sustaining and extending the remarkable growth that has been achieved. The challenge has been enthusiastically embraced and has already brought with it a reorganization of the national treasury office, a restructuring of some of the national agencies, and a streamlining of the flow of information, including statistics.

One area that has required a fresh perspective in many countries is how the national budget reflects and reinforces the priorities of the Plan: human resource development and the advancement of clusters. Where the expansion and consolidation work effectively devolves upon the Councils, in some communities a substantial transfer of funds to these bodies has occurred, as well as an assessment of the resources needed for sustaining intensive programmes of growth at the cluster level. New budget analyses and formulations have taken into account the decentralization necessary to fulfil the singularly important aim of a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.

In the **United Kingdom** the National Assembly, responding to the demands of the Plan, reassessed its staffing situation at the national level and managed through streamlining of functions and consolidation of posts to release the necessary funds to substantially increase the financial support for regional institutions. This step, begun in 2002, made it possible to appoint the first full-time regional training institute coordinator, and later to fund a second post, as well as providing the financial support for positions at the cluster level as these become necessary—measures which are making a direct and decisive impact on the impressive development of the process of growth in that country.

The statement in the document *Building Momentum: A Coherent Approach to Growth* related to re-examining administrative approaches has led many national communities to undertake a process of reflection in light of the realities and requirements of promoting a culture of growth. In several cases the number of national committees has been radically reduced to ensure that the processes of growth receive the appropriate priority and that as many believers as possible are released to focus on the teaching work. **Kenya** and **Germany** are notable examples.

In several countries, the mandates of committees whose functions directly impinge on the processes of growth—such as the National Teaching Committee, the National Child Education Committee, and the National Youth Committee—have been carefully reviewed not only to ensure alignment with the aims of the Plan but also to examine whether any elements are already covered by other agencies, thus obviating the duplication of effort. In some cases these committees, once considered mandatory, have been deactivated where it has become clear that the essential aspects of their work are already being conducted by other agencies, such as Regional Bahá'í Councils, or training institutes. In **Australia** increased capacity at the grass roots made it possible for the responsibilities of the National Child Education Committee to be successfully devolved to the Regional Bahá'í Councils.

Clearly, questions related to the role of any particular committee must be decided on a case-by-case basis and no prescription can be provided that would fit every eventuality. Nevertheless, the principle that the new circumstances created by the Five Year Plan necessitate a reconsideration of administrative arrangements at the national level is increasingly being recognized in many countries.

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The emerging experience in the Bahá'í world, reflected in the foregoing observations, is an impressive fruit of the learning mode increasingly evident in every department of the life of the community. As the processes of growth gather pace, there is every expectation that administrative processes and structures will continue to evolve in response to the particular exigencies of each new stage.

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